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A83C8 FOLLOWING IOWA'S LEAD IN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT

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You are just the right people for me to talk with about some new laws and new program thrusts in soil and water conservation.

Why? Because most of the bold new ideas originated with you or with others like you.

Why? Because the fine "track record" of accomplishments that gives us confidence these programs can work is your track record.

Why? Because self-evaluation and self-criticism are models of enlightened, responsive government that we picked up from you.

When drought and wall-to-wall farming began to increase soil erosion in the mid-1970's, you "told it like it was." You shifted gears where necessary to attack today's challenge with today's programs.

Soil conservation districts and your partners in state and local government have helped all of us:

- Work smarter instead of working harder;
- Prevent fires instead of putting out fires; and
- Invent the future instead of only predicting the future.

Address by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research and Education, before the annual conference of the Iowa Assoc. of Soil Conservation District Commissioners, Fort Dodge, Iowa, November 29, 1977, 12:00 noon.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a tremendous appreciation for your four decades of creative soil and water conservation. It has been very satisfying for USDA to help you. Yet I don't want to leave here without inviting you -- without urging you -- to suggest some ways that USDA can improve and strengthen its assistance to you.

Public participation and local involvement are not simply the latest catchwords in American government --

They are American government, or it just isn't worth much.

I am personally committed to making USDA programs as responsive as possible to local needs. My aim is to help USDA programs be as helpful as possible to America's citizens and resources.

Yet we cannot improve America alone from the Agriculture Complex in Washington. (We call it the Agriculture Complex because nobody understands it.)

Our delivery system depends on having USDA employees out here with you, giving recommendations that can be "site specific" because they are not proclaimed from a thousand miles away.

Our delivery system depends on having USDA employees out here with you, receiving your suggestions on priorities, programs, and policy.

The partnership has been tremendous -- but we'll need your help even more in the days ahead.

We need your help in strengthening our soil and water conservation programs.

President Carter eleven days ago signed the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. It recognizes that the conservation job requires intelligent, purposeful action at all levels of government and personal involvement by all citizens. To achieve that action, and to encourage that involvement, the Act calls for a continuing appraisal of America's natural resource base, trends in its use, and the long-and short-term needs of our Nation and its citizens. You have helped us collect, interpret, and use soil survey information, conservation needs inventories, studies of prime farmland, potential cropland, recreation needs, and so on. You have a number of inventorying jobs underway for this next year. We will build on the experience of all these to find the facts and get them to people who can use them in all kinds of environmental decision-making.

One of Secretary Bergland's first responsibilities, as the decade of the 1980s begins, will be to report through President Carter to the Congress his summation of the soil and water resources appraisal data. At the same time he will forward a five-year program for soil and water conservation based on the appraisal, as well as a statement of overall policy. The appraisal and program are due in January 1980.

That is a tight deadline for a meaningful report. We will need the suggestions of conservation districts, state conservation committees, and others in putting it together. We will actively seek your ideas, your findings, and your assistance in assuring citizen input.

The law also directs Secretary Bergland to evaluate yearly the progress and effectiveness of conservation programs, to measure costs and benefits, and to say what new laws or regulations may be needed. Here, too, we will actively seek your ideas and those of the landowners and other citizens we serve.

Every conservation program can be strengthened -- and I can't find adequate inspiration by staring out my office window at the traffic on Independence Avenue. We need suggestions based on your close kinship to the American landscape, and your understanding of what is needed, to improve it.

We need your help in preserving the best of America's farm and ranch lands from unwarranted development for other uses.

In a State like Iowa where there is so much prime agricultural land it might be easy to be complacent about its supply. I am glad that you are anything but complacent. Iowa is home base for the Soil Conservation Society of America, which has provided strong international leadership and outstanding forums for discussing ways to preserve and improve our best food-and-fiber producing areas. At most of those forums, we find people from Iowa discussing some innovative local and statewide land-use thrusts.

We need your ideas, because I want prime farmland to be a major thrust of the USDA over the next few years. There are five compelling reasons:

-- It is folly to endanger our long-term productivity, even in a time when we once more have record harvests and strong reserves. We can feed and clothe and shelter ourselves -- but we dare not kidnap the farmland base from tomorrow's children. We dare not forget that floods, droughts, and plagues are always around somebody's corner.

-- It is folly to shift prime farmlands out of agriculture and try to make up the production by draining and plowing up America's wetlands and other fragile environmental areas. Wetlands are unique ecosystems that offer many values to America's society and their supply has diminished enough.

-- It is folly to force ourselves to cultivate land that takes more gas and oil to produce crops, to add or replace nutrients, to add or remove water, to protect or clean up the environment. There is just as urgent a need for energy efficiency on the farm as there is in town. Prime farmland by definition gives the best yields with the least inputs of energy and other resources.

-- It is folly to urbanize the acres that withstand soil erosion well and plow up other acres that wash or blow away easily. Despite four decades of good effort, sediment pollution from soil erosion still affects water supplies throughout America.

To substitute marginal land for the good stuff is to backslide on water quality. Our government and our citizens will not tolerate it.

-- It is folly to endanger the agricultural economy that is the base of most rural communities. As you have learned in your very successful Resource Conservation and Development area activities, strong agribusiness is one of the keys to making rural Iowa a more attractive place for present and future citizens. The strongest agribusiness is based on the sustained quality yields from prime and other important farmlands.

My aim as Assistant Secretary will be to guide USDA's programs in conservation, research, and education in a way that has the maximum favorable effect on local decisions about prime farmlands. America ought to be able to plan urban expansion in ways that do not affect more acres than necessary and that do not unfairly infringe on other values of land.

We need your help in the reclamation of surface-mined lands.

The new-Federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 builds on experience on many states including Iowa in deciding which lands to mine by surface methods and how to restore them to productive use later. It deals with old and new coal surface mining sites, as well as some of the surface "leftovers" from deep mining.

More than a million acres in the United States were surface mined for coal in the days when no reclamation was required by state law -- and have not been fixed up or have not healed themselves. There are 14,000 of these acres in Iowa. Reclamation costs may average \$4,000 or more an acre for regrading, topsoiling, engineering structures, and other steps to prevent soil slippage and control water flow. The new law sets fees on every ton of coal mined over the next 15 years, and a fifth of the fund may go to USDA for sharing the reclamation costs on rural lands.

The law also requires mine operators to include reclamation in the mining process wherever they harvest coal in the future and that will be almost 50,000 acres each year, nationwide. We need the coal but we need not wreck the landscape while getting it.

The law also requires mine operators to determine whether an area they want to mine is prime farmland. If a soil survey shows it is, and the state regulatory agency still permits the area to be mined, then special reclamation requirements must be followed.

These provisions can help America meet energy and environmental goals at the same time if soil conservation districts, mining firms, and state agencies can add to their good partnership with USDA. You can help us locate the abandoned lands that can benefit most from a rural reclamation program -- or where water quality can benefit the most.

We need your help in improving water quality through action under Section 208 of the "Clean Water Act."

You have aided water quality for many years -- that is one major benefit of soil and water conservation that not enough people realize. Section 208 may be a way you can reach many of your conservation objectives. Water quality could be the thread that ties most of your missions into one. It could be a way of revitalizing your programs.

Soil conservation districts across America are making valuable inputs in the 208 effort from assistance in inventory and evaluation, to public information and education, to planning assistance, to applying best management practices.

In Iowa, through your Conservancy Act, you have shown that a program combining regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to soil erosion and sediment control can work. It works because it is locally administered and enforced.

You paved the way!

USDA and many others in Federal and State governments have watched the progress of your program closely. If there are ways that USDA can help you accomplish the objectives of your Conservancy Act, I would be pleased to hear your suggestions. Your program is a very foresighted approach.

Iowans also were the first to offer the incentive of cost-sharing to meet requirements of their state erosion-control law. Landowners and the public together benefit from the conservation practices or best management practices installed, so it makes good sense for them to share the cost.

Building on the strength of your cost-sharing idea, Senator Clark introduced a bill this year to provide financial and technical assistance in implementing Section 208 water-quality management plans. Senator Culver then introduced an amendment to P.L. 92-500 itself, which now is in Section 26 of H.R. 3199. The bill has passed both Houses of Congress and a House-Senate conference. We expect final action soon.

Under such a rural clean water program, USDA would sign 5- to 10-year contracts with landowners who would install the best management practices called for in a plan approved by the local conservation district. In exchange they would receive cost-sharing payments of up to 50 percent, or more if the landowner otherwise could not afford to participate or if the main benefits of the work would be offsite water quality improvement. The landowner also would receive technical assistance in planning and applying the practices.

EPA and USDA will be putting money and people where they can have the most significant effect on water quality -- this will not be and cannot be a "wall to wall" effort. Priority setting will be a key part of the program -- and that is where you can help.

You also can insure that enough landowners would be willing to participate in such a program. Neither EPA nor USDA would want to spend a lot of public money in an area only to have so many critical acres still not managed properly that water quality would not improve. A strong public information and education program must be in place before any cost-sharing other incentive program is available.

Soil Conservation Service and Extension professional can assist, but the information and education thrust will be more effective if it is mainly your doing.

Finally, we need your help in improving other water-resource programs such as the small watershed program.

In Iowa, the small watershed program is truly a Federally assisted effort -- you reshape it to fit your special needs.

You decided long ago that no watershed reservoir could be effective unless more than half of the land treatment planned above it were in place on the ground before construction. You made the requirement 75 percent, and you work hard to get even more of the land treatment work done. My hat is off to you for that!

In the Hacklebarney watershed, you went one step further and decided to do without the reservoirs at all -- to achieve the needed flood protection and watershed stability solely through soil and water conservation practices on the land.

I personally believe that this nonstructural approach to water resource projects is -- if you will pardon the pun -- the WAVE of the future. I am going to wrestle a little with Congress on this one -- I am going to press for approval of some projects that have no dams or altered stream channels but instead rely on land treatment, floodplain management, and stormwater management.

I do not mean to imply that floodwater-retarding structures and channel work are things of the past. Last spring we reviewed 700 small watershed projects using new criteria for economic efficiency, environmental impact, and safety. That report still awaits final review and action. The review showed that many structural measures even under today's standards are sound, are economical, and can be fitted into the landscape without unreasonable adverse impact on the environment. Yet I want local watershed sponsors and the Soil Conservation Service to broaden their sights a little, to explore more alternatives for achieving their aims in a particular area.

That is good advice for all the activities that we carry out together. Let's step back and take an overall look at our resource needs and ways of meeting them. Let's zero in on the real priorities and the practicable solutions and then do something with them.

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You demonstrate every day that you know how to march out and do something to further soil and water conservation in Iowa. You have a strong role you deserve a stronger role and every indication I have is that you can have as strong a role as you are willing to accept.

I pledge to you the continuing support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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